

Gen Curtis Emerson LeMay

Father of Strategic Air Command

ASPJ STAFF*



Born in Ohio in 1906, Curtis LeMay saw his first airplane in flight at the age of four or five and became so excited that he tried to run after it. After graduating from Ohio State University, he entered the service as a flying cadet, earned his wings at Kelly Field, Texas, and received

his commission as a second lieutenant in October 1929. Through 1937 he served in various pursuit/fighter assignments, transferring that year to bomber aircraft. In 1938 he led the first mass B-17 flight to South America, an aerial feat that won the Mackay Trophy for the 2d Bomb Group. Prior to 7 December 1941, he pioneered air routes over the North Atlantic to England and over the South Atlantic to Africa.

LeMay began World War II as a group commander in the Eighth Air Force, rising in rank within 18 months from lieutenant colonel to major general and becoming commander of an air division. B-17 units used his formation/bombing techniques and tactics, and B-29 units adapted them as standards. He commanded the raid on Regensburg, Germany, and later transferred to the Pacific to command 20th Bomber Command in the China-Burma-India theater. General LeMay became chief of staff of Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific by war's end.

Upon his return to the United States, he served briefly at Headquarters Air Materiel Command and then as first deputy chief of air staff for research and development at the Pentagon. By October of 1947, he was on the move again, commanding US Air Forces in Europe and directing the Berlin airlift.

In 1949 General LeMay replaced Gen George Kenney as commander of the recently formed Strategic Air Command (SAC) and established its headquarters at Offutt



AFB, Nebraska, thus beginning one of the longest and perhaps most difficult chapters of his career. He inherited a command of poorly trained, understaffed, and relatively unorganized World War II B-29 groups, but by applying hard work and an uncompromising standard of excellence, General LeMay built SAC into a modern, all-jet force run by dedicated professionals. He rigorously trained and exercised his men but also campaigned for better pay and housing. Commanding SAC for over 10 years—the longest tenure of any individual—he oversaw the development of midair refueling, the establishment of new bases and units, the implementation of strict command-and-control systems as well as tough operational inspections, and the creation of plans for integrating intercontinental ballistic missiles with strategic airpower.

In 1957 General LeMay left SAC, becoming vice chief of staff of the Air Force that year and chief of staff in 1961; he retired on 1 February 1965. General LeMay died on 3 October 1990 and is buried in the United States Air Force Academy Cemetery at Colorado Springs, Colorado.

To Learn More . . .

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*This sketch draws on information about General LeMay found in Phillip S. Meilinger's *American Airpower Biography: A Survey of the Field* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1995); and "General Curtis Emerson LeMay," United States Air Force Biography, on-line, Internet, 22 October 2003, available from http://www.af.mil/bios/bio_6178.shtml.